



PRESS RELEASE

New report finds 750,000 pregnant women and children from low-income households are missing out on government scheme meant to provide vital nutrition

- Ahead of the Government's Autumn budget next week, Jo Frost (Global Family Expert and star of the Supernanny show), Emma Thompson, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and over 100 organisations, including the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Feeding Britain, Save the Children UK and Barnardo's, as well as retailers including Sainsbury's, Iceland and Co-op [call on government](#) to urgently extend eligibility for a scheme designed to provide vital nutrition for pregnant women and young children as families continue to struggle with rising food prices
- [The Food Foundation](#) has published a new report revealing 750,000 pregnant women and children on Universal Credit are missing out on the Healthy Start (1) scheme and the vital support it provides because of strict eligibility criteria
- A powerful campaign video narrated by Jo Frost has also been released by the charity today to highlight why more families need access to the scheme
- From September 2026, Free School Meals have been expanded to reach every child in a Universal Credit household; pregnant women and children under 5 must not be left behind

Wednesday 21st October 2026 - [The Healthy Start scheme](#) was set up by the Labour Government twenty years ago to provide critical support to families on low incomes to afford fruit, vegetables, pulses, milk and vitamins in pregnancy and a child's earliest years. Whilst it provides a vital lifeline for those who are eligible, two rules are currently locking out families who urgently need support.

Households on Universal Credit with pregnant women, babies and young children only qualify if they earn under £408 a month (about £4,900 a year), and support stops when a child turns four years old leaving a gap before they start school and can access Free School Meals.

A new report from The Food Foundation (**available on request under embargo**) has revealed that this leaves 750,000 pregnant women and children from low-income

households missing out. The report brings together evidence from a range of sources to show the potential benefits of increasing access to the scheme. For example, expanding Healthy Start to all families on Universal Credit would deliver a return on investment of [£2.36 for every £1](#) spent - a £7.7 billion gain over 10 years as a result of the reductions in food insecurity, increased household disposable income, and wider economic gains.

Jo Frost, Emma Thompson, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and over 100 organisations, spanning health, education, poverty, industry, academia, local government and more have [united to demand urgent Government action](#) in next week's budget to expand Healthy Start and ensure every child gets the healthy start they deserve. This would mean:

- Expanding eligibility to all pregnant women and children on Universal Credit
- Increasing the age bracket to all children under 5 so families have access to the support until their children start school

Government has already shown it is possible to close this gap. From September 2026, Free School Meals have been expanded to reach every school child in a Universal Credit household. Babies and pre-school children shouldn't be left behind while their older siblings are supported.

The call to Government comes on the same day The Food Foundation publish a powerful campaign video, narrated by Jo Frost and created by multi-Bafta winning animators The Tin Bear Project, to highlight the importance of the Healthy Start scheme **(available on request under embargo)**.

Yesterday [Sainsbury's announced a top up to Healthy Start](#) for the period up to Christmas. The Food Foundation hopes this will be the first step towards an industry-wide initiative in support of those in the scheme, and that Government will play its part in extending eligibility.

As the cost-of-living crisis continues, food is substantially more expensive than five years ago. Food and non-alcoholic beverage prices are around [39% higher](#) than in August 2021, meaning nutritional safety nets are more important now than ever. The Healthy Start scheme, in particular, is crucial as nutrition in the first years of life shapes the brain development children rely on to succeed academically at school and give them the best start in life.

The poorest fifth of households with children would now need to spend [85% of their disposable income](#) to afford the Government-recommended diet and nearly one in four households with a child under the age of 5 are experiencing food insecurity. Lower income households are [more likely to cut down](#) on items such as fruit and veg when shopping on a budget. Giving support for families to provide better nutrition during early

years could help to reduce obesity levels and tooth decay amongst children and reduce the long-term risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Anna Taylor, Executive Director of The Food Foundation, said, “Good nutrition in the earliest years lays the all-important foundations for children’s health, learning and future opportunities. Yet Healthy Start is shutting out many of the families it was created to help. The Children’s Commissioner’s stark warning this week about a [childhood lottery](#) makes action even more urgent: a child’s access to nutritious food must not depend on their postcode or on whether their parents earn just above an outdated threshold. Free School Meals now provide a stronger safety net once children enter school; we urgently need sustained nutritional support from pregnancy to that point. Expanding Healthy Start to all families on Universal Credit and to every child under five would close this unacceptable gap and turn the Government’s wider early-years ambitions into healthier childhoods.”

Jo Frost, Global Family Expert and star of the Supernanny show said, “A healthy diet in the first few years of a child’s life is critical to their growth and development. These early years also support a wonderful opportunity to establish sturdy eating habits and build a positive relationship with nutritious food that can last a lifetime. We’re calling for change so that every child gets the healthy start they deserve.”

Lynn Perry, Chief Executive of Barnardo’s, said: “From their very first breath, every child deserves the best possible start in life. Yet too many parents are facing impossible choices as the cost of essentials continues to put huge pressure on family budgets. Healthy Start payments provide vital support to help families afford nutritious food during a child’s earliest years, but too many babies and young children are currently missing out because of restrictive eligibility rules. We know that poverty and food insecurity can have lasting consequences for children’s health, wellbeing and development. That’s why we are backing this call to the government to extend Healthy Start to every pregnant woman and child under five in families receiving Universal Credit. No child should be denied a healthy start in life because of their family’s financial circumstances.”

Dr Helen Stewart, Officer for Health Improvement at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health said, “You do not need to be a paediatrician to know how significant the beginning of a child’s life is for their health and development. The Healthy Start scheme has the potential to ensure that all children, not just some, get

the best possible start in life. By helping families access healthy food and essential vitamins during pregnancy and early childhood, the scheme can support good nutrition at the time it matters most. It can also provide much-needed financial support for families facing rising costs, helping to reduce some of the pressures that can affect a child's health and wellbeing."

Andrew Forsey, National Director of Feeding Britain, said, "Across our network, we see families doing everything they can to put nutritious food on the table, yet too many are excluded from Healthy Start by rules that no longer reflect the pressures they face. Extending the scheme to all families on Universal Credit and covering children until they start school would give parents practical help before they reach crisis point. It would also strengthen the vital work of community organisations by ensuring more families have reliable support to buy healthy food, rather than having to depend on emergency provision."

FOOTNOTES

- 1) The Food Foundation estimated the figure using ONS, DWP and NISRA data to calculate the number of pregnant women and children under five in Universal Credit households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We estimated the number already eligible by assuming current Healthy Start take-up is 66%, based on the most recent government figure available. Subtracting this group from the estimated population eligible under the proposed expansion produced a figure of 749,131 additional people, rounded to 750,000

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NOTES TO EDITOR

[Link to statement and full list of signatories](#)

AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

Anna Taylor, Executive Director, The Food Foundation

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ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION

[The Food Foundation](#) is an independent charity working to influence food policy and business practice, shaping a sustainable food system which makes healthy diets affordable and accessible for all. We work in partnership with researchers, campaigners, community bodies, industry, investors, government and citizens to galvanise the UK's diverse agents of change, using surprising and inventive ideas to drive fundamental shifts in our food system. These efforts are based on the continual re-evaluation of opportunities for action, building and synthesising strong evidence, convening powerful coalitions, harnessing citizens' voices and delivering impactful communications. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest Visit: www.foodfoundation.org.uk